4: Villa Rojas E-4,5 (1938-1944) 1969 NV9 Tzeltal NV9

9. The Tzeltal

ALFONSO VILLA ROJAS

131 OCCUPYING A REGION east of the Tzotzil, the Tzeltal live in the central part of the state of Chia-
133 pas, Mexico. Three natural zones divide this land: gentle slopes and plains in the south (Amatenango del Valle, Aguacatenango, Pinola, Soyatitan, and Socoltenango); high peaks and irregular terrain in the central part (Chanal, Oxchuc, Tenejapa, Cancuc, Abasolo, and Tenango); lower peaks toward the north.

GEOGRAPHY AND DEMOGRAPHY

13 Vegetation varies with climate and altitude. In the temperate or cold lands, evergreen oaks and pines predominate; in the lower and warm areas are high evergreen forests, alternating with savannas and subdeciduous forest (F. Miranda, 1952, vol. 1, ch. 3). In
[245] the temperate and the warm zones coffee and a great variety of fruit trees—orange, annona, peach—are cultivated.

133 Few rivers of any volume cross the moun-
[487] tainous terrain. None are navigable. The hydrographic system is delimited by the Usmacinta and Grijalva rivers; the former

[P.195-A]

a typical outfit with special characteristics. For instance, the men of Tenejapa wear a hat of broad brim and pointed round crown, trimmed with thin ribbons of different colors. They also wear a dark chamarra or poncho with thin white stripes. The characteristic clothes of Cancuc are short, tight pants and a long shirt trimmed with red wool yarn. In Tierra Caliente the wool chamarra is not used nor is the variation in outfit so well defined.

Transportation

Men and pack animals are the principal carriers in the Tzeltal region, which is crossed in all directions by narrow trails. Men carrying loads of 40–50 kg. usually walk, in one day, as far as 8 leguas (leagues). According to Blom and LaFarge (1926–27, 2:386), the Tzeltal of the highlands are so strong "que ponen en verguenza a una mula." In 1944 I observed Indians passing by my Yochib camp, carrying chairs on their shoulders, in which a lady or a child of upper-class Ladinos from Ocosingo and Yajalon would be sitting. Pack animals are now becoming common among the Tzeltal, some of whom also have saddle horses.

Part of the Tzeltal-Tzotzil region is crossed by the Pan-American Highway joining Guatemala and Mexico City. In recent years, roads called "brechas de penetración" for motor vehicles are being constructed. The natives of some communities (Oxchuc and Chanal) have organized cooperatives and purchased their own trucks.

Units of Measure

The system of measures still retains aboriginal characteristics. The main units are:

Nab: Distance between the end of the thumb and the middle finger extended.

Chutub: Distance between the end of the thumb and the index finger extended. It is equivalent to the jeme. The Indians do not use the cuarta (distance between the thumb and little finger extended).

[P 208-B]

5: Blom & LaFarge A,E-4,5 (1925) 1927 NV9 Tzeltal NV9

tied by a string carried down to an arched stick, H, stuck in the ground. This string, by holding down the far ends, counterbalances the weight of the fall at the other ends. At the end of the string the cross-stick, D, holds it against the arch; it, in turn, is held by the trigger, C, one end of which braces against it, the other end against the far side of the trap, passing under the deadfall. A circular fence of sticks prevents an animal from getting at the outer part of the trap. A straight fence on the other side of the fall necessitates its entering through the entrance, AA, to get at the bait, B, on the trigger. The animal dislodges the trigger, releasing D and with it the string. The outer ends of the sticks fly up, and the weighted log falls. In the rat trap, the log and stones came to at least three kilograms, arranged to fall through a space of about ten centimeters, other traps being in proportion. 224

When hunting with a gun, a red fruit called *ahoon* is frequently rubbed on the shot, and *palma bendita, tcul-těc-wil can*, the palm used in church decorations, is used for the wad. This prevents the bullet "from getting tired" before it reaches its mark. [824]

Meat obtained while hunting, if it cannot be carried immediately to the house, is dried on a rack, *tcax*. 251

The primary method of carrying goods of all kinds is by the tump-line, for which, as has been said in the discussion of physical and other characteristics, these people are very well adapted. The tump-line, *pak*, is a broad strip of inner bark, or of cow-hide. For their ordinary uses, this is a single strip, the ends being attached to a net (q. v.) of their own manufacture. When a package too bulky for the net is carried, a long strap is used with the ends tied together. This is looped through itself, around the package, so that it hangs in two slings. Additional straps may be attached to the line where it passes over the ears, to wrap around the sides of the burden. A flat piece of cowhide, *tcokHax*, is worn against the back, to protect the carrier from the chafing of his load. Both men and women use the tump-line, the carrying of objects on the head being unusual. 482

Formerly the Indians of this district are said to have owned a good many mules and horses for packing, which they lost during the recent political disturbances. Many of them know something about packing. At present, however, few if any own cattle of any kind. 498 [78]

The highland rivers do not, on the whole, lend themselves to water travel, although the Bachajon territory reaches to the Bascan, Tulija, and other more amenable water-ways. Canoes are known only as introductions of German or Ladino ranchers. The natives use a 487 • 581 [881]

5: Blom & LaFarge A,E-4,5 (1925) 1927 NV9 Tzeltal NV9

Cancuc
Tenejapa

From Cancuc the road falls slowly away, then it climbs to the steep side of the ridge and at last dips precipitously to a covered bridge over a narrow ravine. All along on both sides little cornfields alternate with second growth. Ahead, the same great palisade that we saw from Tenango rises in a green wall, patched with fields and broken here and there by outcrops of cliffs and hanging valleys. We passed a dribbling of traffic, Indians on foot, and at the bridge met a family of Mexicans noisily eating a picnic lunch. The ravine was deep, rock-walled, with a roaring stream in the shadows of the bottom. From the other side of it the palisade rose immediately, looking almost perpendicular and indefinitely high to us as we contemplated it. The road assumed a stiff grade, rising in a series of zig-zags that gained painfully to the top. Straight up, almost like a ruled line, lay the Indian trail, taking no account of the twists and turns of the road. Our carriers from Cancuc, who took on the cargo that the Tenango men had carried the day before, had gone up that fearsome climb. We tried it, but the horses slid and fell back on their haunches, and we ourselves could barely keep our footing. So we continued along the road, turning and turning, seeming never to gain, and fearing that our animals would never make it. The heat of the sun was thrown back by the hillside and the road.

We toiled on. Low growth and brush on the side of the road gave no shade. The dust rose high. The air, for all the heat, began to have a pleasant crispness that reminded us of high altitudes in other countries. Then we smelt a familiar smell which we ignored until its persistent recurrence forced us to look, see, and believe—that blackberries grow wild in Chiapas! The event of the next hours amused Lazaro greatly, for here in Mexico we found ourselves among familiar northern flowers and wild fruits, buttercups, dandelions, wild roses, blackberries, strawberries, all strange to him. We passed an Indian farm, stuck into a tiny hanging valley, where peach trees and alligator pears were growing together in the cornfield.

At the top of the pass in a shallow V-shaped cut, the barometer read 2,100 meters, a climb of 600 meters—about 1,900 feet—in two hours.

The country changed beyond here to steep ravines, high cliffs, rushing, cold brooks, and tall, dark fir trees clothing the rocks. The tilled fields disappeared, the scattered houses, and stick fences. It was a wild, shaggy country—a perfect setting, we thought, for the home of the rough Tenejapeños that we had seen along the road.

Near evening, a road forked off to the right, leading to a split in a wall of high cliffs through which we could see, already dark with

8: Hunt E-4,5 (1958)1962 NV9 Tzeltal NV9
Amatenango
Aguacatenango

CHAPTER II

THE GENERAL BACKGROUND FOR A CONTROLLED COMPARISON

Geography and Ecology

101
131 The communities selected for this study are located in the southwest quarter of the state of Chiapas, which is the southernmost state of the Republic of Mexico. This is a mountainous area [133] belonging to the Sierra Madre Occidental, and a part of the state's Central Plateau. The Plateau Summit of the area is to the north northwest of the villages, and contains the city of San Cristobal las Casas, ex-capital of the state (the present capital, Tuxtla, is in the lowlands).

The villages themselves are situated in the terraced margins of the plateau, which extend to the South into the Grijalva River Depression, and to the north and east into the Lacandon Jungle.

133
•489 The slightly inclined terraces are criss-crossed by sev-
491 eral small streams tributary to the Blanco River, and by a complex network of paths, trails, and roads, including a section of the Pan American Highway which connects Mexico City with Guatemala and which is being constructed.

131
36 The villages of Aguacatenango and Amatenango are in two contiguous valleys (see Fig. 1) near to the section of the Pan

[TEXT CONTINUED ON PAGE 16]